

“The Dream Lives On: New Immigrants/New Opportunities for Nebraska”

Task Force on the Productive Integration of Immigrant Workforce Population
LB 1363

Executive Summary

Best Practices, Findings, Recommendations And Action Plan for State Immigrant Policy October, 2001

New immigrants are changing Nebraska's demographic landscape. In fact, without the new, largely Hispanic, in-migration, Nebraska's population would have failed to expand over the last decade.

But this sharp growth in Nebraska's “new immigrant” population is more than a statistical anomaly. It is an economic boon -- even a necessity -- to the state, because the new immigrant workforce contributes significantly to the labor needs of Nebraska's economic base, particularly in meatpacking. Without these new workers and their families, much of Nebraska's economic growth over the last decade would not have happened. At the same time, these newcomers have opened new businesses, bought houses, and created new opportunities.

These new families are our newest neighbors. They are the newest members of our ever shifting, ever changing state. They have come, dreaming of a better life for themselves and their families- just like thousands of immigrants that have come before them.

Yet our new immigrants face daunting challenges. Language barriers and cultural misunderstandings prevent many from participating in "The Good Life" in ways most long-term residents of Nebraska take for granted. The health, safety and security of new immigrant families are a daily struggle- and tenously achieved.

But the new challenges for our state reach far beyond the communities of new immigrants alone. Their new homes are situated, and their lives are lived, within the broader communities of the state. Whether within our urban centers, with their rapidly expanding multicultural mix, or within our rural communities which host the majority of the state's meatpacking and meat-processing facilities and their proportionately large new Hispanic labor force, the new presence is deeply felt. These communities face new needs and challenges which affect access to education, healthcare, housing, economic opportunity and justice for all residents.

These are matters of public concern, and are affected by public policy. This includes federal immigration policy, which is often times at odds with the labor markets governing Nebraska's economy and has hindered the development of stable immigrant communities.

At the state level, the lives of our new populations are also directly affected by public policy. State laws and policies can hinder the integration of these newcomers by failing to respond to the linguistic, cultural, economic, social, and educational needs of these new communities.

The Task Force on the Productive Integration of the Immigration Workforce Population was therefore created by the Nebraska Legislature in 2000 through L.B. 1363. The Task Force was assigned the job of reviewing this situation, and making recommendations for how the State of Nebraska can move forward to productively deal with these changes. The Task Force has been a special project of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission.

The Task Force was assigned the complex task to “investigate current statutes and practices of the state and local government[s]” in areas including, “but not limited to, education, housing, transportation, justice system, and health services” and “conduct a study of the immigrant workforce in Nebraska” that assesses “the delivery of human services,” “the role of the state in assisting immigrant workers as they integrate into local communities and the Nebraska labor force,” “the impact federal enforcement programs” have on the meatpacking industry and the economy of the state, and “identify best practices in the area of immigrant worker integration into communities and access to human services.”

The Task Force membership is quite varied, and includes two State Senators, the head of the Nebraska Equal Opportunity Commission, the deputy director of the Nebraska Health and Human Services System, and many local social service, health care, legal, and labor leaders. The Task Force was co-chaired by the Executive Director of the Mexican-American Commission and the Executive Director of the Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest.

The Task Force adopted a definition of the “immigrant workforce population” intended by the Nebraska Legislature in LB 1363. The Task Force defined the “immigrant workforce population” as those primarily Hispanic/Latino families and individuals who have relocated to mostly rural Nebraska communities within the last ten years to initially work in meatpacking and related industries, with the intention of becoming long-term residents of the state. This includes citizens and non-citizens alike. Therefore, the Task Force was most interested in the public policy and integration issues associated with the tens of thousands of these mostly Latino, mostly low-income newcomers to Nebraska in the last decade.

Between September, 2000 and August, 2001, public meetings and public hearings were held in Lincoln, Lexington, West Point, Omaha, South Sioux City, Schuyler, and Grand Island. Each public hearing included panelists and presentations by local community leaders, residents, and organizations. This included police chiefs, city council members, principals of schools, social service agency representatives, civic leaders, business people, school board members, meatpacking industry representatives, labor leaders, anti-poverty groups, and Latino and immigrant members of each community.

The Task Force also toured a meatpacking plant and an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detention center. Task Force members also made presentations to the rest of the Task

Force in their area of specialty. The Task Force was also apprised of recent academic research, reviewed similar efforts in nearby states, reviewed new census data, and kept informed about federal and state legislative activity relating to immigration and the new immigrant population.

The Task Force also sponsored a specific research project to complement its own efforts. This study is intended to take stock of the variety of activities, programs, and initiatives that exist or are deemed necessary to facilitate the integration of Hispanic/Latino immigrant workers and their families into local communities and the state as a whole.

The study is being done as a collaboration between Dr. Lourdes Gouveia, Associate Professor of Sociology/Anthropology at the University of Nebraska-Omaha and head of the Chicano/Latino Studies Department, and Dr. Miguel Carranza, Professor of Sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and leader of the Latino Research Initiative. This study is largely a survey of community members and leaders, followed by focus groups of new immigrant groups. The study will compile valuable information about the level of integration across the state and the level of civic participation by the new populations. The study will be completed later this fall, and will be an addendum to the final report. The study will provide critical support for the public policy initiatives envisioned by the Task Force.

Best Practices, Findings, and Recommendations.

The Task Force has viewed its role as, very simply, calling out to Nebraska public policymakers for action, and to provide some guidance about where to go and how to get there. The Task Force has very consciously focused on the “statutes and practices of state and local governments,” and therefore the reforms of these statutes and practices that will lead to a more effectively integrated immigrant workforce population. The Task Force has heard from people and communities from across Nebraska, and has come to certain conclusions.

First and foremost, the Task Force heard from dozens of Nebraskans regarding the wide ranging and positive efforts to bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps now found across the state. These efforts reaffirmed for the Task Force that positive activity is occurring throughout the state to address needs, develop new leaders, help new entrepreneurs, and celebrate diversity.

At the same time, the challenges loom large. The Task Force believes Nebraska state policymakers must have two priorities as they engage themselves with these challenges in the months to come:

- The new immigrant families joining communities across Nebraska represent tremendous opportunity (economic, social, cultural) for the future of Nebraska- particularly rural Nebraska. **State policies that boost opportunity for these new populations will boost opportunity for all.**
- **It is critically important that state policymakers work more aggressively to meet the educational, economic, and social needs of the children of the new immigrant families.** The highest public policy priority must be to insure children receive access to a quality

education, medical care, safe and adequate housing, and opportunities for an economic and leadership future in Nebraska. If these priorities are not addressed, a cycle of working poverty, “drop outs,” lack of hope, and lack of civic engagement will continue- leading to a lost opportunity for the entire state of Nebraska.

With these priorities, the Task Force believes the time for action is now.

The Task Force, through the testimony gained through the public hearing process, contributions of Task Force members, and independent research conducted both for the Task Force and by others (e.g. the Latino Research Initiative at the University of Nebraska) assembled, in each of the public policy areas they were assigned to review, “best practices” that should be encouraged and promoted by public policymakers.

For example, the Task Force endorses the leadership development activities of the Heartland Latino Leadership Conference, the work of the Nebraska Association of Translators and Interpreters, the commitment to community liaisons by industry leaders, and the community-level integration activities of the West Point Multicultural Action Committee.

The Task Force also made a series of “findings” in each public policy area. These findings document in part the challenges in each area, as well as overall (e.g. language barriers in almost every area). For example, the Task Force found that line speed in the meatpacking industry is a critically important reason for high injury rates, and that lack of bilingual staffers at Health and Human Services and in health care settings cause unlawful barriers to services.

And finally, the Task Force made a series of “recommendations” in each public policy area. These recommendations are targeted to actions the State of Nebraska needs to take to meet the goal of more effectively integrating the new immigrant workforce population. For example, the Task Force recommends the State of Nebraska aggressively modify state educational aid formulas to more accurately take into consideration the new populations, change state law to allow residents to have drivers licenses, and fund more bilingual staffers in state agencies, including equal opportunity investigators.

Action Plan for State Immigrant Policy.

The Task Force believes the State of Nebraska can be one of the first in the country to take a principled stand that its own public policies will consistently welcome and seek to integrate immigrants and newcomers, thereby building opportunities in our state for generations to come.

The Task Force recognizes that a report of this sort is just the first step towards this goal. In this regard, while there is much to do, the Task Force believes if the following actions are taken as soon as possible, state policymakers will be well on the way to creating a “state immigrant policy” that consistently welcomes and integrates Nebraska’s newcomers:

- **Community Partnerships:** In communities throughout the state, far too little is occurring within state government to coordinate its responses to the challenges of the new immigrant populations. The Task Force believes the State of Nebraska should more aggressively support and embark on a strategy of building community partnerships between its own programs (e.g. health and human services, business development services, educational funding, etc.) and local community residents and organizations to coordinate the most effective local strategies. These efforts need to include representatives of the new communities. An excellent example is the West Point Multi-cultural Action Committee.
- **Education:** As too many school districts (particularly small rural districts) find themselves overburdened with quickly expanding new populations with language and education issues, leading to local taxpayer resentment, the Task Force believes the State of Nebraska should modify its state aid formula to more quickly take into consideration the changes wrought in school districts by these demographic changes. This means additional state responsibility for funding for language immersion, ESL, after-school, and similar programs. At the post-secondary level, the Task Force believes too many high achieving students and future leaders are being denied a college education simply due to the fact they are undocumented residents and are denied grant and loan assistance. The Task Force believes state law should be changed to allow these high achieving students to be eligible for grants and loans.
- **Housing:** In community after community, the housing stock is not adequate or affordable for these booming populations. Local governments are overwhelmed, and often times not responsive to these needs. The Task Force believes the State of Nebraska must improve the targeting of housing resources to the new immigrant workforce population. In addition, communities must get additional assistance to meet these housing needs, such as through the creation of new definitions of “impacted communities” for assistance, and programs sponsored by employers should be boosted.
- **Health Services:** Throughout the state, there is too often a lack of primary health care for these new communities, and, even if public clinics are available, they are too far away or there is no transportation. These communities also contain many people who are ineligible for public health care in any event, leading to greater public health problems. The Task Force believes the State of Nebraska must act aggressively to build a more effective public health infrastructure across the state, one accessible to all populations. New funding for public health care targeted for minority and low-income populations needs to also be used for the immigrant workforce populations living primarily in rural Nebraska.
- **Human Services:** While the State of Nebraska is making strong efforts in all parts of the state to insure there are no language or cultural barriers to human services, the problem still exists. In many offices in impacted communities across the state, there is no bilingual staff. In other offices, the bilingual staff works the jobs of two or three. This lack of language skills in human services has led to families either denied assistance or facing a barrier to assistance. The Task Force believes this situation must be addressed as soon as possible, through more cultural and language competence in offices located in impacted communities.

- **Transportation:** Living and working in rural Nebraska requires access to good transportation. This is a hit and miss proposition for too many. Too often, the lack of public transportation leads to the inability to get a better job or get to a doctor. And, too many resident workers are driving without a drivers license or insurance, because they are undocumented, causing great risk to other drivers. The Task Force believes there are practical public safety and economic issues associated with these problems, and recommends the state act to allow drivers' licenses for residents, who will thus have passed a drivers test and been required to gain insurance. Further, the Task Force believes a coordinated state interagency response to the transportation issues faced in these communities must take place.
- **Justice System:** The justice system is responding to the changing demographics of the state, in the courts as well as in day-to-day policing. The challenges are also cultural and linguistic, as courts and police try to communicate. The Task Force endorses the many organized responses by police and communities across the state to build community-level policing and cultural competency, along with the new initiatives to stamp out racial profiling. The Task Force believes, however, the State of Nebraska must act aggressively to insure bi-lingual police officers at all levels. This includes police in small rural towns, who often lose their officers to larger towns with higher pay and better benefits. The state must therefore provide support to impacted communities to promote the ability of bi-lingual officers to be hired and to stay.
- **Employment:** The high turnover, dangerous meatpacking jobs engaged in by tens of thousands of new immigrants to Nebraska communities are the focus of the Task Force. The Task Force endorses the many industry workplace safety projects. Nevertheless, the Task Force believes there is a considerable amount of public policy that should be addressed to make the workplace safer and more stable. Among other things, the Task Force believes there needs to be a fresh look at how responsive the workers compensation system is to injured meatpacking workers, whether it is contributing to a safer work environment, and to whether self-insured status is appropriate within this system. The Task Force also believes compliance with both the spirit and the terms of the Meatpacking Workers' Bill of Rights should be a governing factor in whether the State of Nebraska provides financial or other assistance to an employer. In addition, workforce development boards should consider "welcome centers" such as those used in neighboring Iowa to connect new immigrant workers with good, stable jobs.
- **Federal Immigration Enforcement:** The federal government is the enforcer of federal law as to immigration status, immigrants in the workplace, and similar laws. The State of Nebraska and its local subdivisions are not the enforcers of these laws. Nevertheless, the Task Force heard repeatedly of local and state police overstepping their jurisdiction by, for example, inquiring as to immigration status at traffic stops and then seeking to enforce federal immigration law. This activity serves as a barrier to new immigrants contacting local and state police when they actually need them, such as for a domestic violence problem. The Task Force endorses the efforts of local police chiefs to address this misconception of the role of local and state police, and believes additional training must take place at all levels. The Task Force also believes state policymakers should engage in communications within

local and state communities that such activity will not take place within their communities, thereby increasing the confidence in local police.

The full set of the Task Force's "best practices," "findings," "recommendations," and action plan for state policymakers will be released in the final report to be issued before the end of the year, to be accompanied by the completed integration research study.

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of the Immigrant Workforce Population**

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